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# I Know I Haven't Said a Thing

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I Know I Haven't Said a Thing  
Layla Benitez-James

A DEPARTMENT HONORS THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE  
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AT TRINITY UNIVERSITY  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR GRADUATION WITH  
DEPARTMENTAL HONORS

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I Know I Haven't Said a Thing

“Poetry is what is lost in translation.” –Robert Frost

In the story of the Tower of Babel, God scatters the people, and gives them distinct languages, a punishment for the hubris of humanity. By disrupting the capacity for communication, the story implies not only the importance of language, but also what could be gained when people pick up the linguistic pieces. There is definite power in taking a single idea, and looking at it through the lens of different languages. What you end up with is often more than what you started with. This is not to say that translators are working against God. Nor is it to say they are doing the work of the devil. It is not even to say that I am religious or believe in God with a capital G, though many of my poems deal with aspects of religion. It is merely a way to begin in introducing the theme of my thesis: translation through poetry.

Lately, I have been thinking of writing in terms of translation. I am interested in literal translation between Spanish and English but my definition of translation extends to more abstract applications. When discussing the movements in meaning from Arabic to Spanish, one of my literature professors described the process of translating as seeing a tapestry from the back. The translator is being forced to work with the bare elements of language which make up meaning, before the words are taken and tightened into smooth pictures. It turned out that the professor was quoting from a passage in *Don Quixote* where the speaker was discussing the inability to truly “know” anything from a translation because so much is lost. The idea is then extended to all of literature itself which can be so subjective; nothing can be known. Basically, it is not just

languages that can be translated; poetry, and creative writing in general, can be thought of as a translation of ideas and impressions into a work.

When I think about writing, and then revising a poem, the same snags one finds in translation are present. There is that drive to get the words “right” in terms of tone and meaning. There is that struggle to make a language, or an idea, translate into a form which can be accessed by more people. Implied here is the notion of poetry as a conversation between writer and listener, yet another associative link to the idea of translating. In a “Why I Write” essay from my first year at Trinity, I talk about wanting to be part of this larger conversation of literature. I saw the process of writing as one irrevocably tied to history and community because no one can write alone. We learn to write by reading, and the most consistent advice I have gotten from writers I admire is to read everything. In this way the conversation of literature is also a kind of translation of ideas through literary generations.

Moving into more abstract representations, I love an idea of Petrarch who envisioned the relationship between a translated work and the original as the similarity between a son and father. This brings the concept of translation into the realm of human life in a way that aptly describes the differences which develop from moving between languages. In his “A Note on the Translation” for a work by Pura López-Colomé, *No Shelter*, Forrest Gander calls this comparison up. He notes that

Nicholas Kilmer, in his translations of Petrarch’s *Songs and Sonnets*, points out a wonderful sentence that Petrarch, himself a translator, wrote. Petrarch believed that what the translator writes should be ‘similar, but not the very same; and the similarity, moreover, should be not like that of a painting or statue to the person represented, but rather like that of a son to a father, where there is a shadowy something-akin to what painters call one’s air-hovering about the face, and especially in the eyes, out of which there grows a likeness that immediately, upon our beholding the child, calls the father up before us.

I love the movements of this quote because it not only beautifully describes the relationship between translations, but it represents the idea of literary conversation. This is me quoting Gander, who is quoting Kilmer, who is quoting and translating Petrarch, who is translating the idea of translation into familial ties. I have thought about my pieces of writing as being like my little children; I create them and change them and they don't always turn out the way I intended. My poems have small lives of their own. They represent me but they are not exactly me. Each revision brings them closer to what I would like for them to be and, in the end, I always have the hope that they will have my likeness hovering about their faces.

The process of revision and translation in my own work can be seen in the evolution of my poem "Message." It began with a class prompt in Beginning Poetry inspired by Neruda's *Book of Questions*. In writing "Message" I took two of my questions that dealt with sunrise and sunset, and answered them in the space of the poem. The result was this-

#### Message

How has the sun risen  
from where you thought  
nothing was planted?

It rose messily.  
Hung-over it  
stumblingly  
overturned  
a glass of grapefruit juice,  
which, spreading against  
the slate grey counter,  
slid me rude into a  
marbled morning.  
Now by the time  
the day was clean  
sunset snuck up  
to plunge me  
rude into evening.

Were you shocked then by  
the reds the whites the  
hues of purples, blues?

Yes, but suppose now,  
just for a second, that I  
have in my hands, black and white,  
your page, fresh from the printer.  
It's still warm  
and palm pressed sharply to my hands,  
and I am trying to touch you through words,  
may I? Can I almost see you in the stanzas?  
I am smudging the ink at the top,  
tracing your lines with my finger ,  
and the printer is running out of ink so that your  
last lines grow so faint that to read them is to kiss the page.

In this early draft I established a slow and descriptive answer to the first question, but made a hasty transition to the second question. I wanted there to be a kind of surreal disconnect between the beginning and end, and then have the poem move from abstract description of colors to a human moment with nothing but black ink on a white page. I was working with the idea of what can be seen and described in relation to what is expected. I wanted to portray the ability to really get at someone through writing. However, the poem felt fragmented in the extent to which the last stanza stood out from the others. My poetry professor, Jenny Browne, said it felt like two distinct poems, and I agreed, but didn't really know how to break it up. I tried some methods of radical revision, but I did not like any of them as much as the original, and so for about two years the poem remained more or less in this state.

The real break with this poem came when I was in my creative writing class in Madrid. Our assignment was to write an unconventional adventure poem, and I decided to start with the beginning of "Message" because I liked the idea of having a non-human adventurer. My initial plan was only to translate the first stanza, and have it lead into the poem but then I was curious to

see the entire poem in Spanish. When I got to the fourth stanza, it was very clear that it just needed to be broken apart. Writing in Spanish, I found that I was not as tied to the poem's original form because being coherent was much more important. I had to decide on doing a literal translation, one that could not carry my personal biases towards my lines. The result was this.

### Aventura del Sol

¿Cómo ha salido el sol  
desde donde pensabas  
que nada se plantó?

Salió con torpeza,  
era resaca cuando anuló  
el vaso de jugo de pomelo  
en el gris pizarra cielo  
hacer el amanecer.

Groseramente él nos  
despierta y su aventura es  
trepar al lado de cielo  
y nos hace vivir.

Una flor sin tallo,  
sin raíz en tierra,  
eventualmente marchita  
y cole dentro de atardecer,  
pero mañana saldrá otro vez.

### Adventure of the Sun

How has the sun risen  
from where you thought  
nothing was planted?

It rose messily.  
Hung-over when it spilled  
a glass of grapefruit juice  
on the slate grey sky  
to make the dawn.

Rudely it wakes us  
and its adventure is  
to creep across the sky  
and make us live.

A flower without a stem,  
without roots in soil,  
eventually it withers  
and sinks into evening,  
but tomorrow it comes again.

Here, the second half was discarded, and a more logical and linear progression was devised. However, that second half was written in Spanish and then translated back to English, complicating the process. In Spanish my writing is much slower as I am not able to rely so heavily on familiar phrasing. The words come out as translated thoughts; whimsical ideas are stated more haltingly.

I was then left with the second half of the poem, and I struggled to find a way of more fully realizing the idea I was trying to convey. What I realized was that I was attracted to the ideas of colors contrasting with black words on a page. This evolved into the translation of the way light went through windows and the imagined physicality of the way it created color. The result was this version.

#### Message

Little chunks of color  
all thrown from light  
yelling softly through the  
laceglass window,  
attaching to everything  
they fall on. We love them  
because they don't stay.  
We are together in color,  
we are beautifully  
ancient and all we see are  
these bodies and the light  
making cave paintings  
on the wall. We are apart,  
words evolve and misplace  
color, and now all I get  
is your message  
in my hands, black and white,  
your new poem, it's still  
warm from the printer  
and I am trying to touch you  
through words, may I?  
Bring me some small  
rainbows, please give



every one you have  
 to me and place  
 them across my body.  
 Can I almost see you  
 in the stanzas? I am smudging  
 the ink at the top, tracing your lines  
 with my finger ,and the printer is running  
 out of ink so that your last lines grow so  
 faint that to read them is to kiss the page.

These multiple versions of a single poem show the evolution—the translation, as I understand it—of both language and ideas. It is one exercise which turned into four different poems through a process of trying to get the words right enough to match the ideas in my head.

In this thesis, I wanted to construct a collection of poetry which moves through these different manifestations of my ideas about translation. The manuscript is broken into eight parts and each section begins with a haiku originally written in Spanish and translated into English. There are three versions of each one to show the process, the puzzling out, of my representation of ideas. The first section begins the work with literal translations from Spanish to English, and vice versa. It is followed by poems that speak about language and the meaning of words. Some of them do so by playing with language, and I remain attracted to the sounds of a sentence, or colloquial phrases that exhibit innate and original music. From that kind of chaos comes poems written in form. I love working in received forms for their ability to translate an idea within a specific structure. They are similar to working in Spanish because both force me to slow down my initial process and develop each line before I put them together. Close in process to these are poems which operate in response to other poems. For me, these feel like little translations of other poets' themes and techniques. Then comes two long poems which work themselves up over a single idea and the different associations which come from it. The manuscript ends with

three sections of more personal poems of the self; they are about love, religion, identity and human experience translated through the lens of my writing. Most often I am writing the way my mind works, and the process of getting it onto the page gives form to an otherwise random thought. Each poem is a translation of myself and an ode for what is lost through different modes of representation.

# I

El fuego fresco

cose la luz a través

de los árboles.

El fuego fresco

cose la luz brillante

entre los árboles.

The fresh fire is

sewing a brilliant bright light

through all of the trees.

## La costurera

Estoy caminando bajo la lluvia fea;  
de gris sucio en la mañana.  
¿Recuerdas cuando nos encontramos  
en la piscina cerrada  
y llovía mucho? ¿Te acuerdas?

Cuando por fin pienses en mí,  
seguro estaré muy lejos.  
Pero la lluvia modesta puede adentrarse  
en la ropa más recatada.  
La lluvia cose la ropa a la piel.  
Es difícil decir dónde estás.

No quiero ser preciosa para ti.  
La lluvia desfigura tus bordes y te  
estás desdibujando en todo excepto en mí.

## The seamstress

I'm walking through this ugly rain;  
a gross gray in my morning.  
Remember when we met  
outside the pool but it was closed  
and it rained a lot? Do you remember?

When you finally think of me,  
I'm sure I'll be very far from you.  
But the modest rain can find its  
way inside the most chaste clothing.  
The rain sews the clothes to the skin.  
It's difficult to say where you are.

I don't want to be precious to you.  
This rain blurs your edges and you are  
blurring into everything except me.

## Aventura del Sol

¿Cómo ha salido el sol  
de donde pensabas  
que nada se estaba plantado?

Salió torpemente,  
con resaca, cuando desparramó  
el jugo de toronja  
en la pizarra gris del cielo  
al crear el amanecer.

Groseramente nos  
despierta y su aventura es  
treparse por el cielo  
de lado a lado  
y hacernos vivir.

Una flor sin tallo,  
sin raíz en la tierra,  
eventualmente se marchita  
y se hude en el atardecer,  
pero mañana saldrá de nuevo.

## Adventure of the Sun

How has the sun risen  
from where you thought  
nothing was planted?

It rose messily.  
Hung-over when it spilled  
a glass of grapefruit juice  
on the slate grey sky  
to make the dawn.

Rudely it wakes us  
and its adventure is  
to creep across the sky  
and make us live.

A flower without a stem,  
without roots in soil,  
eventually it withers  
and sinks into evening,  
but tomorrow it comes again.

### Cuidado

Existe una araña quien ha hecho una telaraña  
en el sendero demasiada perfecta, pero  
ella se deshace de todo lo que atrapa.

Cada día hace una nueva tela y la vemos cada día.  
Caminamos, tú y yo, cuando todo es nuevo y la tela  
aljofarada con gotas de rocío parece los diamantes  
de una reina, pero ella se deshace de todo lo que atrapa.

Pensarías que ella estaría triste de perder tanto,  
pero no le importan las cosas que mata,  
y entiendo porque no me importan las cosas que mato.  
Tú dices “no puedes morder mi hombro y llamarlo amor,  
cariño, te deshaces de todo lo que atrapas.”

Cada día, cada día una tela nueva en el sendero.  
Tengo que decir que tenías razón al no confiar en mí.  
Dijiste “¿dónde vas?” y contesté “no sé.”  
Porque yo me deshago de todo lo que atrapo.

### Careful

There is a spider who has made a web  
on the path too perfect, but  
she gets rid of everything she catches.

Every she makes a new web and we see it every day.  
We walk, you and I, when everything is new and the web  
is pearled with dew drops which seem like the diamonds  
of a queen, but she gets rid of everything she catches.

You'd think she'd be sad to lose so much,  
But she doesn't care what things she kills,  
and I understand because I don't care what things I kill,  
You say “you can't bite my shoulder and call it love,  
darling, you get rid of everything you watch.”

Every day, every day a new web on the path,  
I have to say you were right not to trust me.  
You said “where are you going?” and I said “I don't know.”  
Because I get rid of everything I catch.

# II

Las flores caen

tan lentamente, de la

tierra al cielo.

Los flores caen

muy lentamente de

la tierra al cielo.

All the flowers fall

far too slowly from the earth

down to the heavens.

## Something Right

I speak almost  
no Portuguese.  
He speaks almost  
no English but he sees  
I'm reading a book,  
and he asks if I can  
understand. I think so.  
I say, I've read it in  
English so many times.  
He points to a word, this  
one, like this, what is it?  
I smile and say flowers,  
he frowns and we have  
to talk with our hands.  
He makes a loose fist  
and the other hand blooms  
through and I say yes, flowers,  
flores, I try in Spanish, but no.  
He was putting on a glove.  
In Portuguese, Mrs. Dalloway said  
she would buy the gloves herself.  
I say no, it should be flowers,  
and he asks why it matters.  
So I talk about her party,  
about wanting something right.  
But flowers, do we need them?  
When they wilt will we see them  
thrown away? I cannot answer.  
Gloves or Flowers, any errand,  
just to see her walk across a street.  
Who, I wonder, buys gloves in June?



I am from

gypsies. I asked my parents,  
where did I come from?  
and they told me-gypsies  
rolled through town with  
sunflower seeds and silver,  
they handed me over  
in a wicker bassinet,  
they threw the silver  
through the sunset,  
they kept the seeds  
for the long caravan  
ride to no home.

Sometimes you can

unbraid my tight silence,  
and you should,  
let those hairy letters  
loose to crawl and tangle  
themselves into words  
which quietly snarl out  
until I must pause,  
admit again my inability  
to speak and slowly  
step through again  
my sentence. But  
think about how  
my name's such  
a mouthful, how  
it takes forever  
to sing out all the  
syllables,  
an awkward  
song with each  
note letter jum  
bled out  
one,  
after,  
the other.

Walking away

you say you can't bite  
my shoulder & call it love kid.  
But your hands are  
bookends of the body  
and they keep volumes.  
So pleasure said to cleaver-  
I complement you night&day;  
that's the difference  
between you&me  
#1-the orchestra was playing roughly.  
#2-blue, on the rocks, chipped tooth,  
god, he's a strange man  
making love to ice sculptures.

## Keeps

I don't think we should  
whip poor will,  
because he is clever,  
(and slick, and sly, and patient)  
because he keeps us up at night.  
Well, I'm waiting. Lovely.  
And you don't think I should?  
When will the pears appear?  
It beats me, I say, it beats me  
to a pulp of bruised blackberries,  
well dead, I am tapping my foot.  
Make sure I am well berried yeah?  
Buried\*, ha, I know it's a bit loaded  
and lonely, but if you, blue,  
get past the thick bullying jays,  
if you would sing again, I'll say-  
I love you, without meaning  
to, and without meaning.  
And last, and least  
the whippoorwill  
keeps us.

## Ruined

I still have everything  
you said, so as Ruth says  
“entreat me not to leave thee,”  
quieter, fainter, I say so too,  
where you go I will go, but  
it’s not mine, this little song,  
and I cannot take it  
the mockingbirds steal it  
take it here and then there,  
and there will I be buried,  
with every sentence spoken,  
leaving finger prints  
on stainless steel.

Old

Now this is a basement.  
If this is a poem the sun set slyly,  
slipping subdued hues modest into the west,  
I don't want to be precious to you.  
I know I am silly. I also have this love of cedar,  
and how it can hold up a whole house.  
So here is my bottom line-this is not my first  
poem for you, a small and broken guitar.

To get her

It might have been simpler when we were still in Spelling.  
 I could have looked back through my Lisa Frank notebook to see  
 what we were doing (*with mutual action*) together.  
 Spelling is simple: memorization, convenient list of definitions.  
 You get ten words on Monday; you write them out ten times each  
 until they no longer look like real words. You whisk away the whole world of meaning.  
 Just loops&dots&dashes all,  
 strung (*into a unified or structured arrangement*) together in cursive.  
 We would repeat them all (*simultaneously*) together.  
 We look up our own definitions. There will be a quiz on Friday.

I have a wonderful way to remember,  
 she says, how to spell this one: together.  
 She is full of these.  
 (wonderful ways to remember things)  
 You just remember he goes to get her  
 You see, and then they can be together.  
 This stuck in my head, together, with other thoughts.

*To\*geth\*er (tuh-geth-er)* meaning  
*Simultaneously*: we sang together (off key).  
*Into a unified or structured arrangement*: we tangled our eyelashes together,  
 we mixed our marbles together, our fingers, together, were intertwined.  
 We tried (without success) to make our hearts beat together.  
 Also meaning  
*by joint cooperative effort*: You and I, together, we knocked egg shells apart,  
 we whisked the white and yoke together.  
*In harmony, accord or agreement*: we decided on the red velvet cake mix together.  
 We disagreed on the frosting.  
*Into or in union, proximity, contact or collision (of two or more things)*:  
 you had the speech of the slow south, I loved how all your words slid together.  
 I hid the spoons so we would have to use our fingers to stir.

It might have been simpler had we not slept (*with mutual action*) together.  
 I could have thought about other words, I could have kept it simple.  
 But you must have forgotten to get her (oh little me)  
 because we, no longer together, are now (antonym) apart.

# III

Los raíces van  
a organizar todo  
el suelo frío .

Las raíces frías  
organizan el verde  
de todos los árboles.

Cold roots organize,  
around the ground the new green  
of all of the trees.



## The Good Lifeguard

There's a man who comes to swim, I hope he never drowns,  
 when I'm on watch, elevated in my stand, I have to think,  
 what would I do? Sometimes he looks up at me, his arm raised  
 in a slow, lumbering stroke, his face turns towards me when he breathes.  
 His hair is sparse but he looks like he was strong early in his life.  
 I see him nearly naked, with only a clinging suit to protect his dignity.

There's a great responsibility to do this job with dignity;  
 my task is to protect my patrons, to save them if they drown,  
 to pull them from the water, to check for signs of life,  
 although compassion is not one, there is no need to think  
 on their humanity; good lifeguards only have to give breath.  
 At the thought of saving him the hairs at the nape of my neck raise

up in fear. In protest, my heart says, "oh don't raise  
 up one finger to help him." Does this rob me of my dignity?  
 That I don't wish to give him just one ounce of my breath,  
 and wouldn't want to save him and could like to watch him drown  
 is terrifying. Yes, to know this cowardly spite, to think  
 is it wrong to let someone die? Could it be wrong to let someone live,

when you know there's something in them that shouldn't stay alive?  
 How deeply, sadly strange then, when the training is so clear, to raise  
 this question crudely; I'm so sorry but I beg of you to think  
 is every soul worth saving and does each one have its dignity?  
 This dear old man who swims: could you like for him to drown?  
 First hear his charming story that he told with certain breath.

He told the blue-eyed guard 'til he was short of breath,  
 that in his day he was a lifeguard too, trained in saving lives.  
 And one day a little black boy went and got himself all drowned.  
 The old man didn't go to save him, he couldn't help but raise  
 up an eyebrow at this stupid boy, muddying the pools clean dignity.  
 So all he did was sit there, and he couldn't even think

why another man would jump in, and how he could even think  
 this gross thing worth saving, and mouth to mouth give breath.  
 Surely, by that touch, he had forfeited all his white dignity.  
 How deeply, truly tragic that for the rest of that man's life  
 he lived with his lips having touched the lips of that low race.  
 It's odd to be explaining how a human should have drowned.

Though these are more dignified times I cannot stop my thinking  
 that if this old man did drown, wouldn't I be able to breathe  
 just a bit easier, couldn't I live happily, darkening in the sun's rays?

## Scattered Showers

So he says to me, he says, "Is it raining?"

Él dice que "estoy comiendo manzanas y miel."

"I am eating apples and honey," he says "don't worry, neither are staining."

"Don't you mind about keeping things I give you," I says "my promise: a seashell."

Él dice que "estoy comiendo manzanas y miel."

I says "line em up right here." I says "I'll knock em back."

"Don't you mind about keeping things I give you," I says "my promise: a seashell."

"You have what I need" I says, he says "I need what you lack."

I says "line em up right here" I says "I'll knock em back."

"Le'me see" I says "I love that real feel of fur, ya know, that static rush."

"You have what I need" I says, he says "I need what you lack."

It's so much to miss in a kiss but I'll go on and on 'til he says to me "hush!"

"Le'me see" I says "I love that real feel of fur, ya know, that static rush."

"My point exactly," he says, I says "but you sing me to sleep out of spite."

It's so much to miss in a kiss but I'll go on and on 'til he says to me "hush!"

He slams down the door, and I says "what hit me?" to every stolen sight.

"My point exactly," he says, I says "but you sing me to sleep out of spite."

He says "you escape if and only if you would choose to try."

He slams down the door, and I says "what hit me?" to every stolen sight.

He says "it is only when we are willing to get wet when we stay dry."

He says "you escape if and only if you would choose to try."

"You can wake and understand," he says "these lines if you should choose to peruse."

He says "it is only when we are willing to get wet when we stay dry."

I have dropped in dead, soaked through to the bone from the deluge.

"You can wake and understand," he says "these lines if you should choose to peruse."

"I am eating apples and honey," he says "don't worry, neither are staining."

I have dropped in dead, soaked through to the bone from the deluge.

So he says to me, he says "is it raining?"

Hey

Listen you, if I were rain, it would be swell  
 if I could slip in past this roof of you, through  
 to dry inside. Don't you worry over your fragile tomes  
 my mightiest deluge, my damndest downpour  
 is still less than your thatch eyebrows, thick with thought.  
 You'll never know how much I wish you'd wade

into this mild storm of me. Instead you try to find a way  
 to slick me off but there's no denying my gentle swell  
 now. Still longing for your stick stubble I never thought  
 you'd be so bold as to try to dissuade me through  
 this barren, rasping logic with which you belittle poor  
 months, you have already carved them tombs.

Here, let me. Kept in my hutch are these tomes  
 of elegy for those that slip when they wade,  
 we could pick one before it's born and certain. Out they pour,  
 onto the floor, could we at least hold hands as we sift and I swell  
 with the both of us? And just in case we don't get through  
 this remember, there's always been this chance of rain, just a thought.

Couched in the crook of my arm is this soft thought  
 for you which gains fog enough to obscure tombs  
 grey to gray. Just agree, I'll fear nothing as we walk through  
 Montparnasse cemetery. I'll get wet as we wade,  
 winding around done lives but you'll be dry under the swell  
 of the umbrella. Despite the damp I'll glow from every pore

with the pride of morning. We'll take paper and we'll pour  
 the graphite over the carvings, thieving each thought  
 back with us we'll place it in the hutch and watch it swell  
 with soaked in wet new dew, these names off of tombs.  
 And, far from the maddening cloud, more drops, weighed  
 down with their duty, fall and find their way through

trees and trees who seem to say don't stare through  
 us to look at sky! Walking under arbors where the poor  
 rain can't reach I am ready to leave but I must wait to wade  
 until your hand covers mine, sure as shingles, certain thoughts  
 as probable as leaking roofs where seeping rain ruins tomes  
 of fragilely collected bits of paper, causes the pages to swell.

Through hands, no matter how tightly clasped, thought slides  
 as water, pours past woven boughs, runs rivulets down tombs.  
 Listen, this is the rain of me tapping on your tin. Wade into the swell.

### Ghazal for Ghalib

Sometimes we remember, rose by rose, tulip by tulip those  
faces far from us, time taken, dusted into the past. Those  
superfluous silly starry eyed daughters of Bier. They wait  
for night carrying corpses of men's hearts. But consider those  
hearts of their own. Unseen, the performers of work of the night,  
are, during day, curtained in the innocence of sun rays, those  
whose thoughts belong to him, they return to where they spread their hair.  
Tucked to the peaceful niche of night on his strong arm where those  
beauties laid. Where you lay now. Sometimes we, foraging futures  
all our own, see the old ways die, folded into the new. From those  
purple prose of Ghalib we monotheists break bit by bit  
from comfortable customs. We slip from sheiks, we shall see those  
whole cities sliding into dust. It keeps them. And all the while  
the three collectors shine out mysterious in the night. Those  
who feel like Layla are, crazily, slouching towards a time when  
two lips rose in a wilderness of wildflowers for those.

### A Costume for the Actor

Sew to perfection, right sides together.  
I like you but I'm not in like with you.  
Looking again, I could have matched better  
pinned into place, but the cut was not true.  
Soon I'll sew his name into the collar.  
For now I'll rip the seams of all this mess  
Must I pluck each stitch and fix my falter?  
I shouldn't have, won't feel better unless  
I take to placing pins where he'll feel them,  
leave them in the inseam, nape of the neck,  
but no, oh well, that was enough of him,  
not meant for more, there are others to get.  
    giving everything of myself not wrecked  
    new love, and for him I will be perfect.

## IV

En la madera

los rayos aprietan

fuera del frío.

Out from the wood floors,

the rays from the sun press out,

the cold of winter.

Inside of the wood

the rays of the sun pressing

out all of the cold.

Haibun (after Williams)

This is just to say, I, a raven, was pursued by sparrows, nearly crashing,  
plum tired and turning, dropping, catching breaks when I could  
but never losing those two in tow, flying fast and diving faster.  
Well, I said to swallows, for perhaps they were swallows actually,

I have eaten  
the eggs  
that were in  
the nest

which you built in the bare tree, so easy to see, I watched you both,  
sticks and string, lice lined, you laid before the first buds bloomed.  
We are both of us birds silly sparrows, we fly unburdened by sky so  
you see there's no need to knock me, forget those eggs you sat on

and which  
you were probably  
saving  
for spring

for march, maybe may but not for me, isn't it the same thing every year?  
I might have left one, they were so close to hatching, you had better go back  
before your last hope is swallowed by a snake, it's not just me, eaten by ants.  
Where were you then when I came? Although it is my nature, please

forgive me  
they were delicious  
so soft  
and so warm.

Looking Back (after Heberto Padilla)

In love, doubt also  
opens his eyes, and folds  
up that happy map,  
wearing creases,  
obscuring the road  
to be taken.

He sneaks to your side  
and cataracts your future's  
eyes with kisses.

He pulls like a nail,  
caught on your sleeve,  
so, as you try to step  
forward, you discover  
moving is now impossible  
without leaving something  
behind. The great transformer  
of smiling mouths  
(always with the same  
eyes, same face)  
seeks you out in the smudges  
of the mirror and waits only  
for you to look closer.



lucky you (after cummings)

well my guy's tall with blue shy eyes  
as he softly stands, with his soft hands keeping  
sheepish silence on his shorts, awkward for sitting  
side by side in a bed playing the game on our laps  
is his strong body thrilled at the mention of chess  
like a white piece from first move sure of success, when he smiles  
his slow smile it always makes in me a eager check  
and the silly smile easily shaves me of my shyness  
-my guy's tall and taut from running, diagonally  
like a bishop whose spent all its life on a checked board  
and is going to die.     When we finally slip towards sleep  
with these sly hands he begins to softly seek  
about me, shyly, and to kiss my palm and cheek.

The Problem of Claiming Feeling (after Hass)

If I couldn't say, remembering in winter when  
you first sang me *Ave Maria*, it was love, my  
bare feet tugging carpet in the quiet apartment.

If I couldn't say, I grew hot from the sound,  
and the way your eyes wouldn't touch me. Love,  
I thought of it weeks later in California,  
climbing on the mountains near your home.

If I couldn't say it, only, I see how fire burned the land,  
  
or, standing on a spared point of flowers, some brand of bluebonnets,  
how they made me feel, though I could just make out the Pacific, Texas.

If I couldn't say love then, though it was welling in my mouth,  
  
because Adam knew she was missing  
before Eve was created.

High arch, cheek-

(How could I not love a man  
who sees my brown eyes green?)

Love, I say, fearing I will tear the word.

## V

El viento le

espanta el verde de

todas las hojas.

The wind is pushing

all of the old green out from

all of the cool leaves.

The bullying wind

shoving out all the green

From scared, shaking leaves.

This of the dead

Evenings when fireflies would drop in,  
we caught them in jars, maybe all kids do.  
Once a friend convinced me that fireflies  
could not feel their glow when it was lit,  
that they could grow it back if we took it.

So we strung them thin  
threads making  
crawling, glowing necklaces  
lifting with light some  
tangled in our hair.

Or, taking them from their glass coffins  
we would wait for the glow, scrape  
with a stick, see the glow hold  
across our arms, a cheek,  
before letting them fly into the night.  
Thinking we were only borrowing,  
like lizards they could grow it back.  
We had sent them off to die  
among their still lighted living.

Mornings we went to the coast  
we caught fish for dinner,  
'keep him happy' dad would say  
of the big one pulled in we would dig  
and dig in the sand. But holes never stay  
long at the ocean, it was filling in the whole  
time with water seeping in out as the fish cut  
back forth in his water grave.  
He was marked for dead among us living.  
We picked bits of him from our teeth with his own ribs.

A new summer self I try out  
among those living, I think I  
will keep her. I am deliciously  
dead here I cannot concern myself  
with the trifles of some living.  
Years stack up only to be toppled  
bottles of wine set on the floor  
at the edge of a bed I love  
these silly things: the way he asks  
to take a picture leaving

red finger prints on the lens.  
We're in Prague. In a museum  
we see skeletons of two thieves.  
"The hands were bound  
behind the back and the legs  
set in stone to prevent return  
among the living."

So what is this fear of  
the dead returning? It seems we  
kill things well dead enough.  
Their only return is in our  
remembering, which is  
our problem with memory.  
With age the mind is not the first to go,  
but we do become better at forgetting.  
This fear of the dead returning is our  
fear of our wanting their return.  
What we can't have.

Now here comes a boy it kills me  
to leave, then the need to forget because  
the miles will kill us. But I am  
caught up in his ease and the ease  
with which he calls me beautiful.  
By calling me such he makes me so.  
He can take me in the middle  
of the day when the sun and I  
are at our hottest, strongest stored energy.  
Here is a man who has bound my hands  
with his behind my back, set my feet  
in the stone of an afternoon of open windows  
to prevent my return among the living.

## Waking

Consider the slow humgrowl of the flight  
 that's not yet in the light at 5:13.  
 In the morning it crept in over dark  
 roof tops. It crept in under clear calm skies,  
 and still out of sight are the passengers.  
 All sitting, were their window shades drawn down?  
 The captain, had he woke them abruptly?  
 Weaving, humming with tales of turbulence,  
 promising estimated arrivals?  
 Yes there, the sound of the passing plane is  
 carelessly cast into the moping night.  
 The plane, slowly sliding over houses,  
 just noticed by those awkwardly awake.  
 I hear it. Do you think they are all trapped  
 deep in the uncomfortable halfsleep  
 all slouching low in slightly upright seats?

Some days are hard; I pulled a dark brown glass  
 sliver slowly out of my heel; it hurt.  
 I pushed past piles of clothes which make doors  
 hard to open and close but we do try.  
 Just think, we might really be happy here.  
 Once, on a walk (despite our love of sun,) we  
 pressed through the deep shade of a short cut  
 home holding hands against the chill shadows.  
 Isn't it just lovely how you can get  
 phrases from friends without realizing  
 that they change you (oh how much they changed you)  
 Here and now the best things go unnoticed.  
 We've been old here before. We've fallen in  
 the same rhythms of life and shared comfort.  
 You will clean off the counter; I will sweep.  
 Think about new chairs. Dusky blue? Cool green?  
 And all I will need is help carrying  
 groceries in from the car. You'll ask,  
 Are the dishes in the dishwasher clean?  
 With dusty chocolate walls, yellow curtains  
 we think either color could look just fine.

Some nights are hard. I sleep and in one dream  
 you slice the whorls out of my fingertips.  
 We are sitting in a dry yellow field;

you use the apple knife. I look away.  
So I am lifted by a wakeful sob  
to wipe away the clear tears cheek by cheek  
I sit up, rub fingertips together:  
the thumbs against the whorls of the others.  
I flip over and face down; I still hear  
my heart, feel its beating in my stomach.  
I can finally fall back to sleep by  
lying on my back, stomach cupped in my  
left hand, my right is here behind my head.

In the next you are using sandpaper.  
Back and forth you're smoothing over my face.  
Squinting in concentration you begin  
shyly there at the corner of my mouth,  
erasing my lips with a rapid and  
an all too unceasing practiced motion.  
My mouth becoming uninterrupted.  
You shave down my eyes shifting the paper  
as you go between your hands to wear down  
uniformly the cool, rough sand surface.  
Awake again it is the slow sounds of  
the passing plane which keep my eyes open.  
What time, do you wonder, will they arrive?

## VI

La primera vez,

debajo de estrellas,

florece el cedro.

Primera vez

bajo una estrella que

florece el cedro.

The very first time,

under just one star, where the

cedar was blooming.



## Message

Little chunks of color  
all thrown from light  
yelling softly through the  
laceglass window,  
attaching to everything  
they fall on. We love them  
because they don't stay.

We are together in color,  
we are beautifully  
ancient and all we see are  
these bodies and the light  
making cave paintings  
on the wall. We are apart,  
words evolve and misplace  
color, and now all I get  
is your message  
in my hands, black and white,  
your new poem, it's still  
warm from the printer  
and I am trying to touch you  
through words, may I?

Bring me some small  
rainbows, please give  
every one you have  
to me and place  
them across my body.  
Can I almost see you  
in the stanzas? I am  
smudging the ink at the top,  
tracing your lines with my finger,  
and the printer is running  
out of ink so that your last lines grow  
so faint that to read them is to kiss the page.

### Wood Carved Love Poem

Say I found you,  
called you to me,  
or whittled you  
an even heart,  
red stained with  
a sangre slip. You  
could call me darling  
but sometimes I don't  
try hard enough to open  
doors, unexpectedly  
dense and heavy when read  
with metaphor, please don't  
think me weak to speak  
of them this way.  
Perhaps you are a gentleman  
and will open it for me.  
I don't think the tree  
meant to be this heavy  
I don't think we meant  
to try this hard.

## In the City

I will wake you when light pours in through the slats of my ribs. We will talk about what we see out the window. Without glasses we see the same-ish, just overlapping circles of color that wink in and out. Like an impressionist painting you say. But it is more blurred even than that. The trees through the blinds through the window, behind all that the light flicked in is white and I think if only I could paint this I would have to paint us too. I am still the leaf that wakes you. You live now in the city of my ribs, of love and whatnot. Our bed has two small beds together but was once a seed or two who fought for light. I am a splinter in your delicious sleep; difficult drawn and pressed, my breath over a washboard wakes you. That's not all, I still think of you often, I wish only to type in the font of your bed, I wish only to drink your old bath water, to walk slowly up cracks and down cracks, the same crack every time. I still have a button of yours I stole off your pillow and I will keep it is all. Although you might have been bright dust on my contact lens, so I could have been a crack in your inhaler. Our bed would have been tiny, a knot in a tree.

## Run

She loves him and sometimes he loves her.

The run cleared her head, controlled her breath.  
She was the sole runner passing no one, seeing no one.  
She ran beautifully, quickly, her steps a steady  
run run, run run  
more than a tap, too smooth for a thump,  
she ran succinctly through sharp fog, over green grass.

So much goes unsaid, all her reactions are gentle.

She ran that night how she wished she could speak  
sometimes or write. Alone, she pressed on and  
she felt then that she could have met his eyes.  
She would decipher everyshade of greengrey in them and  
would know better than to wish for more.

She laid down, back to ground, facing the sky,  
the very clear sky with not enough stars,  
the right amount of stars,  
the stars were fine.

## Will

You be my valentine  
and I will bring the faint  
sting of rain. We have  
the will to want this, then,  
something we can touch  
and taste. St Valentine  
was also the patron saint  
of bee keepers so honeyed hymns  
for him and also for fainting.  
He came to our house selling  
raincoats but we had all been  
baptized by sun already.  
Later, blessed and bleeding,  
beheaded because he would  
not renounce his faith he tells  
us to travel. Said in his jail cell  
he gave sight back to the blind  
daughter of the guard.  
Saints are not supposed to rest  
in peace. We will.

## VII

La lluvia agujera	The rain stabs the ground,	The rain stabs
y la tierra sangra	and out of the earth is bled	and the earth bleeds
las amapolas.	droplets of poppies.	the poppies.

## Review

Here and there nature always tries again, she's so redundant. Redundant in her use of colors, yes, the same cobalt in a fish fin as in a wing of a butterfly, the same relentless red repeated over and over: red blood cell, red lava flow, red cardinal jumping up and up. Same shades in the dry desert flower as in the pride of barbados. She hits us all over the head with it, she's asking do you get it yet my little carvings? More reviewing needed when the scientist says bees are silly for thinking they get the absolute best deal out of their relationship with flowers, when really the flowers are just using them and the scientist knows these arrogant bees. He says *isn't nature incredible! Making things so perfect, so pleasing!* Crafting objects that look as though they were made by an artist. Forgetting that she made his pretty brain he uses in forgetting that she made his pretty brain, yes, again, redundant. Red ants craft a raft for the rest of their colony, like Noah, only they are the wood, and Noah, and all the animals too, they did this all before god and will do it long after too, here and there again.

## Wood Sorrel

How many times have you called me clover and picked my hearts apart? Unlucky me, for I'm not jealous of the beauty berry, or intoxicating purple mountain laurel. Both will kill you if you eat them whereas I give myself, and give where I grow. I am tasted, a communion wafer, a small tang on the tongue, a sigh through the body; oh my sapped wine blood is a tangy lemon metal. I try to keep hold of delicious iron; however, here are young ones who pry me away, coil by coil, until I shudder into unsupportive spotlight; they toss me, a cluster of tangled ringlets. I was never fond of pansies or impatiens, though these are cultivated with care, cut to me, ripped as a weed, kicked to the curb. Can I comprehend the dangers of gravity? I know I cannot cling to concrete. While sunshine presses purity to my petals rain washes sin to salvation. I fold in around that; it might be enough, when my edges curl in warm and browning, dissolving, allowing for something else, crazily, to grow.



Please

The fountain  
of holy water  
needs a sign which reads  
*please no coins.*

If you know you can't cross  
yourself with wishes,  
could metal take its holiness?

Look to the quiet  
Virgen de Guadalupe.  
She looks right

down surrounded  
by gold, soft face  
from the mountains.

She says she is your  
mother but she will  
not wash you, please,  
she has not kissed you.

And Also With You

Amen!

There is art in heaven.

For the poor earth

Pray.

Chords fall around the candles, stinging out twitches of light.

We say "peace be with you," and they take communion

I place my arms over my chest to be blessed.

I don't cross myself; I don't touch holy water.

Father,

I can't cross myself; I can't touch holy water.

I place my arms over my chest to be blessed.

As they take communion I say peace be with you

Chords fall, candles twitch they are stinging so

Pray!

For the poor earth

There is an art to heaven,

Amen.

On easter they say

today we're going to learn something about Jesus,  
say the old men sitting on couches, and they love the Lord,  
and they love their satellites. They say, modern angels,  
They have over thirty three and they are up there all  
the time near Jesus, singing the prophesy over all  
the whole wide world. They say we're at the harvest  
now! They say the harvest is pouring in. So many souls,  
fifty million Arabs a day are turning to Jesus Christ they say  
even the secular media knows that, they say they convert their family,  
my aunt, one says, my aunt over there told me on her deathbed  
she said darling, I can feel the hand of Jesus in my hand.

## VIII

Espolvorea

silenciosamente;

esta polilla.

Here it is dusting,

both silently and gently,

this little moth here.

It dusts

silently;

this moth.

## Listen

I never know what's best.  
For a maroon red wasp  
crawling on a pale  
green curtain,  
he will die inside,  
maybe on the window pane,  
maybe on the floor  
where I will have to  
sweep him up with  
leaves and long  
white dog hair, sometimes,  
still slightly alive  
but unable to fly, they  
move their legs so slowly,  
trying for something. Sometimes  
I put them outside.  
I never know how  
long they live.

## The Policy for Returning Art

The Artist from Ohio went down to México.  
 He needed some dried hummingbirds for his cross.  
 He had already had hundreds shipped to his studio.  
 Only to discover, when they were all glued on, that  
 he was not even halfway done! So he went down  
 to the market himself, his Spanish is so good  
 he goes and haggles with the old women in tiny shops.  
*No no*, he says, *not just one, all of them, as many*  
*as you have*, they say, *you only buy one*. He says  
*no, I will not pay all that, just this much*. His friends,  
 they take in a careful camera and in the video  
 he pulls out money, fanned like a wad of feathers  
 it makes a wing; he plucks some bills out of his  
 little moneybird. And the old women say alright,  
 bueno, and when he finally has enough, he leaves.  
 They all go on the cross, big enough for a person.  
 It's art! It's fantastic! Their little dried brains remember,  
 back in México, the old ways are many ways, but not this.  
 Sometimes, the people, they place a dried bird  
 on their person, tucked into a pocket, or a bra.  
 They bring love, you can dry their tiny hearts  
 and grind them, they bring love. This art he made hung  
 in a huge room it brought so many people who said,  
 yes yes, implicitly amazing! We must have it! One couple  
 took it home. The cross, so large, and even so far from  
 home, had the humming birds quietly waiting, yes,  
 it may take months and months but in the warm spring  
 it bloomed with maggots and was quite a heavy cross.

## Smoke

Some mornings I forget, sitting inside myself.  
Do I bruise? You can get sunburned, tan?  
My skin, tea steeping in the sun, stirred darker,  
sharp dust, more bitter, careful freckles.  
My mother edited my papers when I was younger,  
crossed out *mixed* and wrote *bi-racial* neatly above.  
*You got pretty hair, you mixed? Yeah,* and  
I think of my mother, how she cooked for my  
father's family and filled their house with smoke,  
how in the close south she teared, and kept cooking.  
There was once a great grandfather, who would not look,  
would not hold me when I was a baby. He is dead now  
and so I won't know him. I know I haven't said a thing.